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Work and Gender among Uyghur Villagers in Southern Xinjiang

Ildiko BELLER-HANN

As is widely known, the People's Republic of China has introduced extensive legislation to promote equality between the sexes (Croll 1980:5)[1]. It is also recognized that changes in this respect have been slow, and that in some areas of social life the progress has been reversed since the beginning of the reform period in the early 1980s (Stacey 1983; Rai 1995; Mackerras 1995:158). During the decades of collectivization minority areas experienced special treatment which facilitated the persistence of traditional values (Mackerras 1995:159). In spite of many radical social changes, basic assumptions about women's status and power relations within the household have therefore persisted with great strength among the Uighurs.

My research project has focused on changes and continuities in gender relations in Xinjiang throughout the twentieth century. This project could only be undertaken with Han Chinese co-researchers, and it was often interesting to hear and observe how these local scholars broached the issues of work and gender. They repeatedly made the point that Uighur women's present situation is a step backwards after the decades of collectivization, arguing that once collective responsibility was largely abandoned and control over farming handed back to households, women had fallen once again into the grip of Islamic patriarchy[2]. It is ironic, however, that the general situation reported from elsewhere in rural China, where it is not possible to blame Islamic influence for the problems emerging since the onset of reforms, is not unlike the situation which I encountered in rural Xinjiang[3]. I argue in this paper that rural women's present position does indeed reflect strong and direct continuities with pre-socialist values, but contrary to the official rhetoric, I see these as persisting throughout the decades of collectivization. A similar line of argument has been formulated by Davin, who sums up the general situation in rural China as follows : "... I argue that the inequality of women is rooted in family structures, and that as these structures have been reinforced by recent economic policy, it is unrealistic to think that such inequality will be eliminated in the near future" (Davin 1995:29). In the present situation rural women's economic contribution to the household in Southern Xinjiang remains hidden or devalued, in ways

common among women producers elsewhere[4]. Before exploring this theme with the aid of fieldwork data from 1996, it is important for my argument to sketch the main principles of work and society in the pre-socialist period.

Men's and women's work before 1949

Informants' recollections of pre-1949 divisions of labour are far from uniform. This variety reflects the fact that the division of labour took different forms among different social groups. It also reveals a strong tendency to stress the value system prevailing at the time, rather than actual practice. Recollections have also been strongly influenced by communist ideology to which many men and women were exposed during the commune period (1958-1978) which emphasized the 'feudal' nature of women's subordination in pre-1949 society.

Indigenous sources describing the daily life and work of men and women make a sharp distinction between male and female domains. Men engage primarily in agricultural production, while women are responsible for processing raw materials, i.e. preparing food, making clothes, and providing domestic services. An indigenous description of how men and women in the oasis of Guma[5] disposed of their day reveals a set of assumptions and expectations of how people occupied themselves in the course of a normal day. According to this text, dating from the 1930s, a man would normally get up in the morning and proceed to the mosque to say his morning prayers. If the mosque were near his parents' tomb, he would also go there to pay his respects. By the time he went home, his wife would have got up, prayed and prepared food, and the family would share a meal. Then the man would feed his animals and go to his fields. At lunchtime he returned home, ate and slept before in the afternoon bringing home fodder for his animals. Later he might go to his garden, eat grapes with his family and in the evening he might entertain guests, with whom he would perform the evening prayer. Women too started the day by saying their prayers. In the course of their day they had to take care of the house and children, prepare and serve meals, and carry out all the jobs that their husbands had set them. A woman was responsible for the welfare of the members of the household, including nutrition, sanitation, health and education of the children, the milking of the cow and cream preparation. Women also sewed clothes for their families (Jarring 1951:83-91).

Another source dating from the first decade of the 20th century describes women make dough and bread (*nan*), and prepare all kinds of food. All women had to make clothes at home except for the wives of rich men, who could employ the services of a professional dressmaker. The wives of common people spent their time sewing, sweeping the house, washing the laundry, picking lice, combing their hair, and making up. Some skilled women could make *doppa* (embroidered skull cap; Schwarz describes it as "a brimless Uyghur headgear" 1992:267) and embroider headscarves, others could sew overcoats and dresses, while some would spin yarn for sale. Women in the counryside took part in agricultural work, did the weeding and milked cows. Winnowing grain, sowing, harvesting and carrying water, looking after the animals, haircare and self-decoration are also classified among women' daily occupations. (Muhammad Ali Damolla 1905-10:15)[6]. Jarring's informant points out that 'some bad women do not care for the welfare or harm of (their) houses. They stroll about embellishing themselves. But then the husbands of such wives either divorce these wives or they themselves take care of the keys of the boxes, having shown the household implements to those wives (i.e. their duties)" (Jarring 1951:89).

References to women's work show them primarily not as cultivators but as domestic workers. Jobs such as keeping the domestic fire going or fetching water were also considered to be women's work. Fetching water used to be regarded as shameful for men, except when the woman of the house was ill; in those circumstances the man was prepared to take over and do her jobs (Katanov-Menges 1933:1217). This late ninteenth century description of men and women's work by a native of the oasis of Kumul represents men as the main agricultural producers but allows that women too participated in work on the land : *"Men cultivate cereals, they do the watering and harvesting. The reaped cereal is tied by the women. The horse doing the threshing can be led by either the man or the woman"* (Katanov-Menges 1933:1217).

Informants recalling pre-socialist conditions commonly claim that women did not work outside in the fields. That many women did in fact perform agricultural work has already been alluded to above. Confirmation comes from Jarring's informant from Guma, who mentions that "some women, when they sow maize or wheat, follow behind their husbands and put the seed in the furrow" (Jarring 1951:91). A similar situation was also observed and noted by George Sheriff in 1928 : *"A woman follows behind the plough, pouring seeds into the furrow. She keeps the seeds in a gourd. Then a few men and women just walk over the sown area and kick the sandy earth over the seed - a very easy business"* (Sheriff 1928).

The formula which attributes land cultivation exclusively to men is probably a legacy of the pollution prohibition according to which sowing the seed of any cereals was a male prerogative. Women were not allowed to walk across a sown field or go to a well in case their very presence might pollute the water and the field, the two vital resources of subsistence. As our sources confirm, women did perform agricultural work in pre-socialist times. Informants concede that this may have been the actual practice, but it was not the ideal situation. The apparent contradiction between the written sources and modern informants' focus on women as domestic workers is a reflection of the upheld ideal which saw its expression in the lives of the richer strata whose women could withdraw from agricultural production. It is these women to whom Tenishev's female informant in 1956 must have alluded: "[Before] there used to be women who did not do any work. Today there are no such women" (Tenishev 1984:137).

There was undoubtedly considerable variation according to age as well as social and economic position. Individuals' recollections imply that women of the richest strata were the most housebound. Wives and daughters of wealthy men performed tasks mainly within the domestic domain, since they had sufficient numbers of servants or day labourers to work on the land. Those representing the middle range, i.e. wives of small scale-farmers who themselves had to work their land, were likely to be found in the fields alongside their husbands[7]. These middle income families also practised extensive inter-household labour cooperation. Many landless peasants worked as sharecroppers or day labourers, and their wives worked both as agricultural labourers and as domestic servants if they found such employment. Indigenous texts confirm a divergence between actual practice and values, and that elite behaviour established the norms for the entire community, even if their actual attainment remained beyond the reach of the majority.

Sources from the past also illuminate patterns of managing household finances. Jarring's informant from the 1930s describes a domestic situation in which the woman had full control over the domestic budget (Jarring 1951:88-91).

"If her husband has sold something belonging to the house and brings the money along his wife will spend it for a necessary purpose without asking her husband. Her husband will not ask, “What have you done with the money?” Sometimes his wife (will say), “I will

invite some guests. Please give me ten or twenty sar!" she will say. Her husband will say, "Ten or twenty sar is not sufficient. As you have the key in your own hand, why do you ask me! Take yourself from the box and spend as much as you like to spend!" he says. That wife (says), "Why, (it is true that), even if I did not ask, it would do. But (I would rather) spend it with your permission," she says (Jarring 1951:89).

The above paragraph presents an affluent household, where the wife had the leisure to invite her own guests and the husband not only allowed her to make free use of the common funds, but also encouraged his wife to spend more than she had intended for prestige reasons[8]. My informants' oral reminiscences in villages near Kashgar suggest that control of the household budget was usually the privilege of the male household head. This was especially true of poor households with little or no cash income. Jarring's information from Guma, however, is valuable in implying an ideal pattern of gender relations and prosperity to which many poor families must have aspired. His evidence also reveals that variations existed in an era characterised today by modern Chinese propaganda as an inflexible feudal patriarchy.

Further insights into domestic budget arrangements might be gained from marriage and divorce documents and other lawsuits. Such data are mostly inaccessible to foreign researchers at present, but one published document from the late 19th century is revealing :*"A sum of thirty -three tangas was lost from the house of Sufurgi Bai from his bed, and afterwards Sufurgi Bai said to (his) wife Ai Khan: "If you have put away this money, thirty three tangas, produce it, (and) I will add twenty-four tangas, and will make a cloak after your heart's desire and give (it to you) ..."* (Shaw 1878:86).

Here the man kept the money in his bed and his wife was accused of stealing it from there [9]. Another document from the same period sheds partial light upon both domestic budgeting and conjugal obligations : *"...Malaq, the son of Qabil Bai, made a legal agreement (as follows): that on account of contentions (with) my wife Aqlim Bibi, I, who now agree, having been unreasonable, henceforward have undertaken not to strike or beat (her) without reason; to give (her) the necessary cost of living at the (proper) time, and have undertaken not to take any strange man into the house where my said wife is and whenever it shall be known and proved that I have taken a strange man into my house into the presence of my wife, or have beaten her without just cause, my said wife shall be free, if she chooses, to give me the writer of this agreement, one bill of divorcement separating herself"* (Shaw 1878:85).

This short document reveals several important aspects of domestic arrangements: that domestic violence was justified if the woman gave cause for it; that taking strange men into the presence of a wife was regarded as an offence. This refers to the prevailing modesty code (*namähräm);* and that in this particular family, although the man was holding the purse strings, he gave regular cash allowance to his wife, not according to specific needs but on a regular basis[10].

It is noteworthy that in various life-cycle rituals, such as weddings, circumcision rituals and mourning ceremonies women were supposed to contribute food and clothing and cash contribution may have been expected from men. Women's gifts were often products of their own domestic labour, the acquisition of which therefore did not necessarily require cash. This illustrates the general principle of pre-Liberation gender relations : men and women played complementary, symbiotic social roles. Certainly these were profoundly marked by Islam; but to conclude simply that men exploited and dominated women is a gross simplification not only of the social diversity, but also of the underpinning cultural constitution of male and female personhood[11].

Men's and women's work during the decades of collectivization

In this section I treat the first three decades of socialism as a unity, even though I am aware of many swings and changes of emphasis in what can loosely be thought of as the Marxist period. One of its most radical changes was the mass mobilization of women, thought to represent a huge 'reserve army of labour' (Croll 1980:4). In the Xinjiang context this move was indeed a radical break with the past, not because it sent women to the fields for the first time, but because it rejected the previously upheld *idea* that women *should not* work in the fields. In the public domain the new official ideology was that in the name of progress and equality women should take an equal part in production. This shift turned upside down the traditional modesty code regulating men and women's everyday behaviour. It is possible that this factor contributed to the bitterness with which Uighur men and women remember the socialist transformation of the sexual division of labour during the collectivized period[12].

The agrarian reforms of the 1950s which culminated in the setting up of the communes in 1958 had dramatic repercussions on all aspects of social life[13]. Collectivization changed traditional property relations and inheritance patterns : once land passed into collective ownership it ceased to be the marker of wealth and status that it had been previously. Recurring themes in peasants' memories concern communal eating and the insufficiency of food, communal work, enforced communal childcare, and restrictions on artisans' private practice. The establishment of communal kitchens temporarily emptied household kitchens - some informants recall bitterly that not even a teapot was left at their homes. Communal cooking divested the peasant household of its role as a unit of consumption. One informant quoted his father, who apparently often used to say: 'The big pot is full, the little pot is empty'. This short sentence is more than an ironic reference to the years of communal eating during the Great Leap Forward which Uighurs call the era of the 'Big Pot' (*Çong Qazan*): it also confirms the general view concerning the unequal nature of distribution. Private property was retained in the form of houses and tiny plots which usually took the form of a back garden where people could grow small amounts of cereal. A maximum of two sheep could be kept at home, and those who overstepped this limit risked to be subjected to public humiliation and other forms of punishment. Informants recall working in the fields in all seasons six days a week. Some craftsmen were allowed to keep practising their trade in officially organized workshops (*karxana*) but many more could not get employment in these establishments and were given tasks in the fields. Making money for private gain was not merely discouraged but also severly punished[14].

Sending young women to do heavy work previously regarded as men's work flew in the face of traditional expectations of gender roles. My Chinese co-researchers quoted impressive figures to prove that women's equality was principally realized through women's participation in production[15]. Thus in the county of Toqquzaq in 1958 thirty-two reservoires (*su ambiri*), and 838 irrigation canals (*östäng*) were constructed by women's groups, 11 800 *mu*[16] of uncultivated land were opened up by them and an area of 36 000 *mu* was afforested by women. Many women took part in mining activities (*tag dolquni*)[17], which provided coal for 'backyard' steel production in the autumn and winter of 1958, an experience that still looms large in the memories of both male and female villagers. What for my Chinese co-researchers represented a great advance for women was remembered with great bitterness by the people themselves. Many women attribute their present ill-health and backache to the communal work they were obliged to undertake during the years of collectivization, even during late pregnancy and soon after giving birth. Several informants said that 'women were used instead of draught animals'. Their testimony

contradicts evidence from elsewhere in China according to which 'women were usually allocated lighter jobs' although the same author also allows for cadres' miscarriages in this respect (Davin 1976:133)[18]. Inadequacy of diet and calorie intake were also perceived to be contributing factors to women's difficulties. Like elsewhere in China participation in the domain of public production did not ease all aspects of women's domestic burden (Croll:1982).

People in the 1990s have generally scathing views about the efficiency and rationality of collective work during the years of collectivization. It included putting down fertilizer, gathering wood and levelling out fields, a job which many people described as totally unnecessary. As one man summed it up: 'we were made to do many useless things, just to keep us busy'. Local custom was maintained in some respects, in that men and women often worked in segregated groups and female work leaders were assigned to lead female working groups (cf. Davin 1976:147). Memories of collective childcare arrangements are surprisingly bitter[19]. In one village creches were organized in private houses, while there was one public kindergarten in the same building which housed the headquarters of the production brigade. Small children were entrusted to the care of older women, and women who were exempted from work for forty days after they had given birth. It could happen that one woman would take care of a large number of children, and this was particularly hard on frail and elderly women as well as young mothers who were still sick and weak after delivery. Several women recall how they were regularly harrassed by the production team leader shortly after delivery to return to communal work. One couple who had four small children during the early years of collectivization recalled : *'It was hardest for couples with young children. Each morning we would have to get up and carry the baby and his cradle to the creche, and take the others to the kindergarten. At lunchtime we would rush home, and my wife would cook a quick meal and suckle the baby who then had to be taken back to the creche'*.

Occasionally, when the creche could not be opened because no one could be found to take care of the babies, working women had no choice but to take their babies with them into the fields. Of course experiences were not uniform, and not all women worked in the fields. Those engaged in communal cooking or sewing in the communal workshop have somewhat happier memories than those who took part in the mining work in the mountains or in working on the land. Easiest of all was the job of those who became cadres at a young age and were put in charge of supervising communal work. It seems that the main reasons why peasant women have largely negative memories of the support services of the collective period, which were meant to ease their burden was, the obligatory nature of such provisions, the inadequacy of practical implementations, and the largely negative effects of the collectivized period on the household economy (scarcity of food and fuel) as well as on social life (inadequate provisions to celebrate religious festivals and lifecycle rituals) with which the memory of such support services is inextricably connected. The creche system also entailed a further difficulty: lactating women would often breastfeed babies left in their care to keep them quiet and happy. This meant that a great number of milk siblings (*emildas*) were created, who, following Koranic edicts were then not allowed to marry each other. This practice limited the circle of available marriage partners in the neighbourhood and ran against accepted ideals. Nowadays most women report that if a mother cannot breastfeed her baby she should resort to cow's milk rather than let another woman feed her infant which would lead to creating milk siblings.

For men the major problem during the years of collectivization was how to augment their families' meagre income, since the daily food allowance (*norma*) was never enough. This meant moonlighting for many craftsmen, who continued to practise their profession to make cash at home in secret (*mäxpiy*) before and after the communal work. Others tried to raise sheep, grow fruit and wheat on their tiny plots for the black market.

As elsewhere in China, men's work was valued more highly than the same work performed by women. Although the maximum daily points (*nomur*) one could earn varied according to the nature of the job performed, women's maximum was consistently kept lower than men's. A typical example quoted to me was that for performing work on the land the maximum daily earnings of a man was 25 *nomur*, while that of a woman was 18 (cf. Croll 1980:28; 1986:6). It would seem that this officially sanctioned devaluing of women's work in public through unequal remuneration was fully in line with patriarchic values. No major shift took place during the decades of collectivization in the primary identification of Uighur women as carers and nurturers despite women's large-scale mobilization for communal work.

Since the decision-making power of the household was largely taken over by the collective, there is no evidence to assess the claim that the gender equality advocated by officials was actually achieved in the intra-household context. In the absence of regular cash income, decision-making over a very limited family budget remained, by and large, in the hands of the male household head. In such circumstances the management of the household budget had to be tightly controlled. Furthermore, the demands of organized communal work for all people limited women's movements. They were always struggling to find the time for household chores, childcare and social obligations. Many found it more difficult to go to town, where in the past they could be involved in market interaction[20]. While pre-1949 patterns of budget allocation showed variation according to social class, as a result of the general economic 'levelling out' during collectivization, the scarcity of cash and the universal obligation to take part in production, the pattern of budgeting which privileged the male household head, now appears to have become more widespread among Uighur peasant families in Southern Xinjiang.

Men's and women's work in the reform period

The reform period is commonly dated from the end of 1978 and was effectively launched in Xinjiang from 1980 with the splitting up of collectively farmed land and the distribution of plots on an egalitarian basis to rural households, not with full ownership rights but with long-term leases[21]. Work regarded as requiring physical strength, such as ploughing, harvesting, irrigation and construction remains identified as a man's job. Once again, most of women's daily movements take place within the space of the domestic sphere, which includes her own home and the immediate neighbourhood. A typical day for a peasant woman starts at dawn with prayer and the feeding of animals. This is followed by preparing tea and serving breakfast for the family, cleaning, cooking lunch and later on supper, and another session of animal feeding; twice a week she must wash, and once every ten days she must bake bread. There is usually more than one woman in a household and the division of female labour is organized according to age and family status with the mother-in-law taking charge of the children and the daughter-in-law doing practically everything else. Such arrangements vary from family to family and periodic variations can be observed within the same household. For example, when the daughter-in-law is pregnant or shortly after childbirth her mother-in-law may take over some of her household chores. Married daughters commonly visit their natal home once every eight or fifteen days (depending on the proximity of their natal home) and during

such visits they often take on household chores, especially food preparation. The seasonal nature of some jobs women engage in, including agricultural work, as well as the varying pattern of men's activities, also require constant adjustment from women in organizing their work. Taking care of a few sheep may involve trips to the field during the growing season to gather grass, which may take up to one or two hours a day. Cleaning involves sweeping and (in the summer) sprinkling water on the mud floors of the house and the courtyard. Meal preparation for the family remain time consuming, since most meals are wheat-based and on each occasion fresh dough and vegetables have to be prepared just before cooking. Such procedures may take up several hours per meal. Baking is usually undertaken by two or three women together, sometimes on a neighbourhood basis, and it takes up half a day, as does washing since most households have no washing machine. During the time of agricultural work many women do go to the fields to work alongside men, and women participate equally with their husbands in harvesting and sowing.
In the present era too women continue to be regarded as primary carers. Men insist that it is very important to have a woman in the house, and it is expected that elderly divorced men or widowers should try to remarry. As an old man whose third wife had just left him explained : *'We can't do without a woman. We have to have someone to boil the kettle and make tea, to bake bread, wash our clothes and take care of us when we are sick. My son could not care for me physically if the need arose, and my daughter or daughter - in -law should not do it because of the modesty code. A wife needs to be around. Beside, a man needs someone to sleep with'.*
Although elderly women may also consider remarriage, and the practice is perfectly acceptable, they are not thought to need a husband to the same extent, especially if they have a son or another male relative close at hand. While women are considered to be weak (*ajiz*) and incapable of looking after themselves, and therefore in a constant need of male protection, male protection is not limited to the conjugal relationship. It is somewhat ironic that although women's physical weakness is constantly emphasized in popular lore, they are nonetheless perceived as physically more self sufficient than men. A woman's value thus finds expression in terms of the services she can provide within the domestic domain, comprising social and sexual reproductive functions. This is underlined in marriage and divorce customs. Nowadays, even if a young couple has already acquired a house of their own, they stay with the husband's family for a number of years. The time of separation from the parental home must be agreed upon with the husband's parents, who require that their daughter-in-law perform some years of 'service to her mother-in-law' (*qeynana xizmiti*). Customary divorce settlements require that the amount of possessions a woman can take away from her husband's household in case of divorce should depend on the length of time she had served her mother-in-law, and therefore if the divorce takes place within a year after marriage she is not entitled to anything.
In the post-reform period beginning in the early 1980s the gender specificity of certain jobs is again emphasized. Housework, childcare, care for the elderly and piecework, such as making the traditional Uighur hat, the *doppa*, are all identified as women's work. Agricultural work, business and most other crafts are perceived as men's work. Communal work has survived into the reform era and is the obligation of landholding peasants to work for the township in the construction and maintenance of irrigation canals, roads and schools, and in opening up wasteland to cultivation. This communal work is popularly known by the pre-1949 term denoting feudal corvée obligation *alwang*[22]. The official term is *xalis ämgäk*, literally meaning voluntary or altruistic work. Although the adjective *xalis* is widely used in other constructions, the official appropriation of the term for resented compulsory work has devalued it. Truly voluntary work organized by

the community itself, such as the building of a mosque, is now referred to with another expression *öz ixtiyari bilän ämgäk* meaning 'work done out of one's own free will'[23]. Communal work is unpopular because it makes inroads into the time which people would otherwise use for income-generating activities. The work is often said to be poorly organized, and those who can afford to do so will pay a poorer man (often a young boy) to attend in their place. It is significant that communal work, which during the decades of collectivization had to be performed by both men and women, has once again become an exclusively male responsibility and no woman is ever expected to undertake such work. This view of the gender-specificity of communal work underlines my argument that the large-scale involvement of women in all types of production during the era of collectivization was regarded as fundamentally inappropriate and against traditional norms of division of labour.

Specializations

The most successful households of the 1990s in the villages we studied appeared to be those which managed to engage in extra-agricultural business activities as soon as this became possible. Some households with traditions of a family craft were able in a short period to accumulate enough capital to become specialized households and build up lucrative animal stocks[24]. Others with a craft that generate a more modest income can still earn enough cash to ensure a comfortable living standard. Felt-making families (*kigizçi*) are a good example of the former, while the latter case can be illustrated by cobblers *(mozduz*) who buy up old shoes and sell the repaired and cleaned products on the second-hand market. During the years of collectivization open apprenticing was not possible, although the trade could sometimes be learnt from a father who worked secretly at home. Such conditions limited the options of many young men who were brought up in the 1960s and 1970s. They typically started physical work at the age of ten or eleven to earn workpoints and through them grain for their families and many have remained illiterate. These men, now in their thirties and forties, represent a lost generation. They and their nuclear families constitute some of the poorest households of the relatively well-endowed villages where we worked. Today their options are extremely limited, many make cash through working as hired labourers, competing with each other on the casual labour market (*medikar baziri*).

As part of the government's initiative to encourage rural specialization, most villagers in one of the hamlets we studied specialize in intensive animal husbandry. Out of the thirty households we visited, most had between 30 to 70 sheep accommodated in the courtyard. Since most peasants have only a small amount of land to cultivate, agriculture is not perceived as an income-generating activity. Animal husbandry is therefore the major source of cash income to these families. The feeding and watering of these animals is exclusively done by women, and this job often takes up several hours of their day. Cleaning the pens was sometimes done by men, but often also by women. Men's main responsibility is to buy and sell the animals themselves and to buy animal feed from the market[25]. In these households women arguably contribute most of the total cash income of the household. Since the marketing is regularly done by men, the cash income generated by women's labour tends to remain in men's hands.

Felt-making, like other crafts, could be learnt either from one's father or acquired through informal apprenticeship. Felt-makers have been traditionally men and although many could not practise their trade during the years of collectivization or could only carry on in secret, nowadays it is a legal and lucrative business. In felt-makers' homes women often work alongside their husbands and carry out some stages of the work by

themselves. Married women who have not learnt the business from their own fathers pick it up from their husbands shortly after marriage. They estimated that at least fifty percent of the total labour input was theirs. Yet these same women described themselves as unqualified with no special knowledge while their husbands were considered to be specialized craftsmen. Since marketing is again the responsibility of men, the resulting cash income also remains under male control; women's role is reduced to that of unpaid family labour.

Somewhat similar is the situation in another hamlet which has been assigned the task of specialization in making wedding chests (*sanduq*). Many local men are qualified carpenters (*yagaççi*). In addition to making the wooden structure they also decorate it with metal strips which they fix onto the surface of the chest with many small nails. In other families with no expertise in carpentry the undecorated chests are bought for decoration. In such families women usually learn the art of decorating and often they do as much or more of this work as their men. Among men this job is typically done by teenage boys and young men, for whom it is a way of making money; but because it entails continuous banging and monotony it is not considered a suitable career for an adult man and nobody perceives it as a long term career. Decorating wedding chests is not a craft on its own right that one needs to learn as an apprentice, it can be picked up in the course of a few weeks informally. The buying of raw materials and marketing of the finished product are again exclusively done by men, so that women's participation as cash earners is disguised.

The same pattern can be observed in households where men engage in repairing old shoes for resale. The repair job and the cleaning of the shoes are often equally shared by women. But while men are the acknowledged cobblers (*mozduz*), women are perceived merely as helpers.

Thus women's participation in virtually all areas of production which I could observe, including agricultural work and animal husbandry, crafts such as felt-making, decorating wedding chests and shoe repair remains masked. It is referred to as 'helping their husbands' or as an extension of their daily domestic chores. They have no direct access to the income they generate. Such families follow a traditional pattern of budgeting, which can be characterized as the 'doling' or 'asking' method and 'gift giving', patterns which express unequal, hierachical relationships (cf. Zelizer 1994:141)[26].

One particular activity that I could observe more closely in which Uighur women's income earning abilities cannot be disguised is *doppa*-making, an exclusively female craft where the buying of raw materials and selling also remain under female control[27]. Yet here too women's economic contribution is devalued. Unlike animal husbandry, which women do as part of their domestic chores (*öy isi*) and agriculture, felt-making etc. which is classified as 'helping their husbands', piecework is perceived by both men and women as leisure activity which women do 'in their spare time' (*bikar waqtida*) even when they spend as much as six hours per day on it. It is possible that this interpretation of handicrafts as leisure rather than work among peasants had been common in pre-1949 society and applied to male crafts as well. The primary occupation of men was agriculture, and that of women housekeeping. In 1956 Tenishev's 73 year old male carpet weaver from Khotan referred to weaving as a leisure activity done after he had finished his work (Tenishev 1984:77). If this was the general situation, it is certainly changing in the reform era at least in those villages which derive most of their cash income from sideline occupations, which results in the higher valuation of men's crafts. However, even

though *doppa*-making is officially classified as a recognized sideline, it continues to be perceived as leisure rather than work.

Very different is the position of *doppa* makers who work in the Kashgar craft centre. These women, many of whom come from neighbouring villages are employed full time by this state run enterprise. They do eight hours work six days a week and are paid by the piece. Like many village women working at home, they too specialize in specific stages of *doppa* making. They prefer to be employed by this state run entreprise, mainly because of the fringe benefits they enjoy in terms of meat allowances at the times of the religious festivals, a secure income in the long term, subsidized health care and other perks that their status of government employee offers. Being part of this stratum also gives these women enormous social prestige, much higher than that of rural women or even urban housewives. In contrast to ordinary pieceworkers, these women perceive themselves, and are regarded by others, as income earners.

In the local media rural *doppa* makers are hailed as examples of successful development planning, while women's agricultural work and participation in virtually all other income generating activity are devalued. This is underlined by the fact that the All-China Women's Federation publicly acknowledges women's performance mainly within the domestic domain: on Women's Day some village women will be selected for praise as a good mother-in-law (*güzäl qeynana*) or a good bride (*güzäl kelin*), but not for much of their economic performance - for this it tends to be the male household head who receives official commendation.

Conclusion

In this paper I have considered Uighur peasants' perceptions of work in three periods, pre-1949, 1949-1980 and post-1980. I have argued that their experience of the collectivized period was largely negative. This also holds true for men and women, even though official ideology in the 1990s, as represented by local research collaborators, remains that women have been the beneficiaries of socialist gender policies. Since 1980 most observers agree that women have withdrawn once again into the domestic sphere. I have argued that their participation in production and contribution to family income remains significant in the 1990s, but it remains masked and by and large undervalued. Both men and women perform a wide variety of tasks throughout the year, and the nature of their daily work is far from immutable. Variation exists according to season, locality and opportunities to specialize, age, and household composition. In spite of the new opportunities many households enjoy, the legacy of the collectivized period endures in the poverty of middle aged men who were prevented from learning a craft. Whereas in the pre-socialist period there was a gendered division of labour which assigned different tasks to men and women, but valued both, in the socialist period for the first time men and women were thrown together to carry out almost identical tasks but, even when doing the same work, men received the greater credit. After 1980 the socialist legacy has made it very difficult to recover the pre-1949 pattern of domestic relations. In spite of the official promotion of gender equality, in the 1990s rural women's subordination is perpetuated by the socialist authorities themselves. Peasants are under the firm control of the government, which means that their decision-making power remains extremely limited. Present government policies are fostering new inequalities among peasants and this is exaggerating women's subordinate position, especially among the poor.

In summary, the pre-socialist legacy prescribed clearcut division of labour between men and women which, however, allowed for variations in women's participation in production and some degree of female control in the household. The norm was set by

more affluent households but practice and values often diverged, especially in the middle and lower-ranking groups. These traditional patterns reveal great similarities with Croll's description of traditional patterns of the division of labour and morality in rural Han Chinese households (Croll 1982:224-225). Behind the ostensibly egalitarian policies, informants' recollections reveal a drastic violation of local morality as well as the explicit subordination of women through enforced communal work and inadequate support services. In this my informants echo Croll's comments on the uneven establishment of rural welfare facilities in China generally. Women's burden during these years increased greatly. This is again clearly formulated by Croll in her seminal analysis of rural women's position in China: 'Peasant women have thus been expected to enter the waged labor force and, at the same time, to continue to service and maintain the household. It seems that the establishment of the communes may not have reduced the demands on women's labor so much as they have led to an intensification of female labor. There has been some redefinition of the sexual division of labor in the public sphere, to the benefit of women, but despite numerous policies to reduce the content of domestic labor and equalize the distribution of the remainder between the sexes, there has been little correlative redefinition of labor within the domestic sphere.' (1982:239-240). Together, local and Maoist legacies combine in the new context of 'socialist commodity economy' to ensure that women's work remains undervalued. It is curious that local Han scholars in Xinjiang, representing the official views of the Socialist State which is responsible for this situation, continue to pretend that patriarchy flows only from Islam, and to claim that the policies which the state has rejected since 1980 were actually the right policies for ameliorating the position of women.

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NOTES

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2. Elsewhere in China problems concerning the persistence of traditional patterns of sexual division of labour into the socialist period have been explained in terms of 'ideological conservatism' (Croll 1982:240).
3. The explanation must be sought in the precise types of male dominance encountered in Chinese and Uighur societies. For an understanding of the latter Kandiyoti's sensitive analysis would provide a good starting point (Kandiyoti 1992).
4. For example see White's study of Istanbul pieceworkers (1994: 4-6); Sharma 1980:126-7. Within the Chinese context Croll comments on the less visible nature of women's work (1988:96-7). For a description of 'ideological bias' concerning women's work see Benería 1982.
5. In the transcription of placenames I followed traditional English spelling, the sole exception being the name of the province, where the officially accepted form is used. Uighur words are given in their standard form as they appear in Schwarz's dictionary (1992) and therefore do not reflect southern pronunciation.
6. A collection of essays written by a local mullah probably around 1905-1910 in Kashgar, at the instigation of G. Raquette, the Swedish missionary surgeon. The unpublished

manuscript is held at the Lund University Library. For a discussion of source materials for social life in Xinjiang see Bellér-Hann 1996.

7. A very similar pattern was found by fieldworkers in India, cf. P. Jeffery, R. Jeffery and A. Lyon 1989:46-47.

8. A reference to women's 'family status production work' as elaborated by Papanek 1989.

9. Stealing money from the husband was one of the many illicit strategies to which, for example, American wives resorted in the early twentieth century to counteract their relative poverty (Zelizer 1989:358).

10. On the earmarking of domestic currencies see Zelizer 1994.

11. Moreover, the incidence of high divorce rates indicates that even if Islamic cultures generally can be construed as patriarchal, the position of women in Eastern Turkestan was markedly different from norms elsewhere.

12. The traditional modesty code finds expression in the concept of *namähräm*, an Islamic notion derived from the Koran which originally refers to clarifying the incest taboo. In practice those men who are *namähräm* to a woman are all those who are potential marriage partners to her and therefore in whose presence she must show all signs of modesty and avoid intimacy. The definition of the concept covers many aspects of women's conduct in daily life, but informants agree that, although officials and more educated people like to refer to it as an outmoded relic of the past which degraded women and is incompatible with modern notions of sexual equality, it is still decisive in regulating women and men's everyday behaviour.

13. On women's participation in production in the Chinese countryside see Croll 1980 and Davin 1976. Within the wider framework of discussions of memory and history reference must be made to Watson 1994. To the best of my knowledge Uighur peasants' views of this era have not been treated in any publications.

14. For an excellent summary and evaluation of this situation in rural China in general see Croll 1982.

15. These figures were quoted to us orally, but we were denied access to written statistics of this kind.

16. Chinese area measurement. 1 *mu* = 1/15 hectares = 1/6 acre.

17. Literally 'mountain wave'. This expression is a socialist invention. The word *dolqun* was typically used during the years of collectivization in a figurative sense to refer to the collective work effort. For example *inqilap dolquni* meant 'revolutionary tide' (cf. Schwarz 1992:271).

18. Croll notes that 'lighter' jobs assigned to women were not physically less demanding (1986:6). Both Croll and Davin deal with the general situation in China, and as far as I am aware their data comes from outside Xinjiang.

19. This is quite ironic, especially when peasant women's complaints concern institutions which were originally introduced to reduce their household responsibilities. On such initiatives see Croll 1980.

20. Many informants also comment on the absence of suitable vehicles: carts and draught animals were made available mainly to cadres, and common people would have to walk many hours to get to town.

21. For general discussions of the rural reforms see Nolan 1988, Croll 1988 and Kelliher 1992.

22. An unpublished indigenous document dating from the 1930s from Yarkand calls forced labour *hasar* (Molla 'Abdul-Qadir:2), a term also quoted by Schwarz (1992:392).

23. The pre-1949 equivalent of voluntary work is given by Tenishev as *özimiz çiqagan* (1984:30).
24. On diversification and specialization among rural households in China see Croll 1988.
25. In this village women only very occasionally went out to collect grass.
26. This roughly corresponds to the 'pool pattern' or 'common fund' as described by Roldán 1988:233.
27. It is very likely that similar is the situation among women who specialize in producing yoghurt and creme but I have no evidence to support this.